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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/IR, NEA/I, AND NEA/FO LIMBERT, CORBIN.

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SUBJECT: IRAN/IRAQ: THE VIEW FROM NAJAF

Classified By: Political M/C Gary A. Grappo for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Local interlocutors from Najaf's social, economic, political and military circles discussed with Post's Senior Iran Watcher (IW) and PRToffs the scope of Iranian influence in the province, the role of the Shia clerical establishment (Marja'iyah), notably Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, and the challenges confronting the province's farmers who are unable to compete with Iranian-subsidized produce. Interlocutors generally cautioned against a premature U.S. departure and agreed that Iran remains an influential force in Najaf, leveraging its ties with Iraqi political groups to extend its influence. Iran remains wary of Sistani's social and political clout among Shias, notably in Iran, given the Grand Ayatollah's rejection of the Iranian regime's adherence to clerical rule (vilayat-e-faqih). END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) During a recent visit to Najaf, local interlocutors, including the province's head of military intelligence; the chairman of the Provincial Council; a well-connected Shia businessman; the president of the farmer's union; the chief judge of the province; and a representative of the local Chamber of Commerce shared their views on the state of political and economic development in the province and Iran's role.

Provincial Council Chairman

¶3. (C) Sheikh Fayedh al-Shimerri, the Chairman of Najaf's Provincial Council, a religious cleric turned politician and member of Maliki's State of Law coalition asserted that Iraqis throughout the country were growing increasingly frustrated with foreign interference, notably from Iraq's neighbors. He singled out Saudi Arabia and Iran as the biggest culprits, but noted that a "mental revolution" was underway among Iraqi youth against foreign agendas seeking to undermine the country's stability, pointing to such trends in Anbar against the Saudis, Najaf against the Iranians, and Mosul against the Turks.

¶4. (C) Al-Shimerri echoed other interlocutors' concerns about a premature U.S. departure from Iraq and risks of a political and security vacuum. He noted that Iran had formed the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) political coalition comprised of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrists, among others, in an effort to bolster ISCI's image as the pan-Shia party of choice in the elections.

¶5. (C) Al-Shimerri expressed concerns about rumors circulating in Najaf that the USG was sponsoring a Baathist conference in the U.S. IW dismissed the news as baseless rumors intended to undermine the USG-GOI relationship.
(NOTE: A recent press report in an ISCI-owned media also mentioned a proposed Baathist conference scheduled to be held

in Washington in February. END NOTE).

Keeping the U.S. Bogged Down

¶6. (C) Major Uday, a provincial military intelligence officer and Maliki supporter, described Iran as a threat to Iraqi stability, commenting that the Iranian government's (IRIG) goal is to keep the U.S. bogged down in Iraq in order to discourage U.S. military reprisals against the IRIG for its nuclear program. He commented that Iran fears Iraq's potential influence in the region, and will continue to support local proxies to exert its influence and undermine Iraq. "Iran does not offer its support for free," Uday noted, there will be a price to pay for each proxy in exchange for Iranian support.

¶7. (C) Uday is supportive of Maliki's decision to forego (at least for now) a political alliance with the INA that is dominated by the pro-Iranian Sadrists and ISCI. Joining the INA will only undermine the integrity of Iraqi security institutions as ISCI/Badr and the Sadrists will try to fill key security positions with their own supporters, many of whom are unprofessional and sectarian, Uday cautioned. The Badr Organization, heavily influenced by Iran, continued to maintain a very effective intelligence arm, according to Uday. Many former Iraqi fighter pilots who flew sorties against Iran during the Iran-Iraq war were now on Iran's hit list (NOTE: According to Uday, Iran had already assassinated 180 Iraqi pilots. END NOTE).

¶8. (C) Uday also noted that Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) elements often resort to bribes (USD 10-20K) to secure the release of supporters in GOI detention and that the Najaf anti-terrorism unit regularly receives cash offers to release detainees. He asserted that Najaf's police chief, Abd Al-Karim (aka Abu Ahmad Al-Miyahi), is a "former" member of Badr with dubious loyalties. Najaf's chief justice, Kareem Faroon, a well-respected judge also alleged that the Iraqi police were responsible for placing an IED close to the PRT base in November. "He (police chief) is a bad guy. After all, he is still part of the militia (Badr)," Judge Faroon asserted.

Sistani: "What Do the Americans Want?"
----QDI>RpQd%'MkQQto pulse the cleric on his views about matters of political consequence. Kelanter explained that Sistani's son, Muhammad Ridha, serves as the main conduit of information between his father whenever a religious/political message needs to be conveyed to Shia imams in the country.

¶12. (C) Sistani does not allow Iranian students to enroll in the howzeh (religious seminary) in order to prevent IRIG infiltration, Kelanter asserted. Kelanter himself is suspicious of Iranian intentions and asserted that the imams of the holy Abbas and Husayn shrines in Karbala, Shaykhs Karbal'aie and Safi, were "in the pocket of the Iranians", despite their proclaimed loyalties to Sistani.

The Sadrists

¶13. (C) Regarding the Sadrists, Kelanter recalled fondly his time as a student of the late Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (Moqtada Al-Sadr's father), commenting that, unlike his radical son, the late cleric was admired and respected by many Iraqis. He Qthe late cleric was admired and respected by many Iraqis. He criticized Moqtada for failing to capitalize and build on his father's legacy. Al-Shimmeri also praised the efforts of Sadr's father and sought to distinguish between "good" and "bad" Sadrists; the former being adherents of Sadr's father. Major Uday believes the Sadrists are politically weak and continue to splinter as former JAM elements form their own groups. (NOTE: Major Uday believes Al-Shimmari is a closet Sadrist despite his public alliance with Maliki's coalition. Al-Shimmari commented that the Iranians had told the wayward Moqtada to stay-put in Iran for the time being. END NOTE).

Farmers: Iran and Syria Waging Economic Warfare

¶14. (C) Jabar Al-Garawi, the head of Najaf's Farmers' Union commented that most farmers support PM Maliki for his increasingly non-sectarian political message and success in improving security. However, he complained that Iran and Syria were waging economic warfare on Iraqi farmers by flooding provincial markets with low cost/quality produce that are heavily subsidized by their respective governments.

¶15. (C) Iraq's neighbors were pursuing such measures in order to prevent economic development, thereby forestalling the continued success of Iraq's new democracy, Al-Garawi alleged. These problems were further aggravated by water shortages due to the ongoing drought, the high cost of fuels, outdated farming techniques, and power shortages, he noted. Al-Garawi confirmed that the Najaf Provincial Council had recently voted to ban the import of foreign tomatoes into Najaf in an effort to bolster local producers. (NOTE: 60 percent of Najaf's labor force works in agriculture. The sector is the province's most important revenue generating industry, followed by religious tourism. END NOTE).

¶16. (C) Samira Al-Halawi, an outspoken female member of the Najaf Chamber of Commerce, having recently returned from a USG-sponsored visitors program in the U.S., railed against Iran's pervasive commercial influence in Najaf, noting that many Iranian-owned companies secure favorable contracts in the province by capitalizing on ties with local politicians. She also criticized Iraqi politicians "for being ignorant and overly-reliant on clerics" for their political welfare.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) Najaf, as the epicenter of Shia Islam, carries significant importance for Iran and its overall campaign to expand its sphere of influence in Iraq and the region. The city is home to many Iranian pilgrims and traders eager to profit spiritually and financially from the city's religious and commercial offerings. There is general awareness and acknowledgment among many Iraqis that Iran's influence, albeit a historic reality, does not always translate into mutual benefit for Najafis. Many also acknowledge that Iran will continue to capitalize on its ties to the city in order to foster greater socio-economic dependencies. The extent of its ability to influence the ways of the Marja'iyyah are more limited, particularly during Sistani's tenure, given the clerical establishment's unrivaled theocratic and geographic prominence when compared to its "sister city" Qom.

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